

## Stanton Lecture 6: The Habit of Reason

By John Milbank

We have now seen why the most ancient and seemingly exotic mode of philosophy, the philosophy of participated transcendence, as transmuted by theology, is best able to sustain the reality and value of what we normally take to be real and valuable. It is this philosophy which most avoids vicious dualities. It is the same philosophy which more honestly admits that the only possible stable truth is that which is eternal, but which allows that finite realities can share in this truth to varying degrees. In this way it uniquely embraces both the integrity of scepticism and our instinctual sense that there is nevertheless eventually something to be known.

It was also seen how participation has a horizontal as well as vertical dimension. Truth is not secured only by the mediation of eternal identity, but also by the continuity between being and knowledge in the finite world. In knowing, we share in the material universe and this universe shares in our knowledge, in which it comes to a certain fruition. This continuity is guaranteed by the migration of *eidōs* or form, from its shaping of material things to its shaping of thoughts in our mind, while remaining the same, identical *eidōs*, as Aristotle taught. At the same time, we discovered ways in which a 'Romantic' reworking of the perennial philosophy needs to rethink *eidōs* also in terms of sign, number and aspect. In each case we can see how these categories allow that there can be a certain twilight zone between thought and unthinking reality: language is human, but smoke is naturally a sign of fire and organisms somehow 'read' the signals of genes; mathematics is made up by us and yet we discover that its measurements are also in some degree the building-blocks of

reality; aspects of things are the phenomena that we apprehend and yet these phenomena are the manifestations of ontological realities. In all three cases our cultural constructions are also envisionings of nature, while the reverse holds good also.

But in the final three lectures we are going to discover how this revision of the perennial philosophy – the philosophy true to the origination of philosophy as metaphysics, beyond ontologised physics, by Plato -- needs to be taken even further. Fully to grasp the realm of what mediates between reality and reason, we need to see that our understanding as form, sign, number and aspect is always most fundamentally a matter of feeling and imagination. In reaching this conclusion, we are better guarded in the future against a certain rationalism that which imagines that truth is given to us by virtue of a cold objective gaze. It is that attitude, I claim, which gradually caused the rift between Christianity and the perennial philosophy from the later Middle Ages onwards, leading to a distorted attitude towards the Bible and tradition which encouraged fideism and revelatory positivism. For the reverse face of rationalism is always a voluntarism which has sundered will from reason by omitting the mediating role of teleological desire.

In order to approach this transition to feeling and imagination, we need to consider more deeply the question of how human knowledge works. We saw in the first lecture how the enterprise of a more critical metaphysics, as epistemology, or the attempt to determine what and how we know, while initially bracketing the question of ontology, broke down in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> C. Since dogmatic scepticisms in the wake of this collapse either proved themselves to be variants of such epistemology

or simply unlivable in practice, this collapse eventually ushered in a return to ontology and to a more speculative mode of metaphysics. We have been exploring its variants – but within this scope we need to consider in detail the ontology of understanding, the question of how our human reasoning works and why a reworked perennial philosophy is able to give the best account of this working.

More explicitly, we need to ponder further the question of the relation of reason to ‘the other to reason’ – I do not say to ‘reality’ because that begs the question of the status of reason itself within reality. I shall approach this issue initially in terms of the *status questionis* both in analytic and in continental philosophy.

To take the former first. Simon Blackburn has rightly concluded that a certain crisis of scepticism today just as much afflicts the Anglo-Saxons as it does the French. He again rightly asserts that what has generated this crisis in the former case is a combination of a rejection of the so-called ‘myth of the given’ on the one hand, and the embrace of a ‘fluid holism’ on the other. To refuse ‘the given’ is to refuse any duality between empirical information and rational reflection, empirical synthesis and rational analysis; between empirical content and rational scheme and between empirical fact and rational value. Perhaps also it is to refuse the distinction between empirical reference and rational sense. But once these linked series of distinctions between the *a posteriori* and the *a priori* have been abandoned, one is left with a holism that asserts that beliefs are only ever about other beliefs, such that the relevant unit for reflection on human understanding becomes not the individual assertion but the whole tangled web of our cultural constructions. To pull at one thread is to pull at them all and shift the entire pattern because, in the absence of God or any stable

transcendent pole, the totality, though all-determining, is not itself stable. Thus we are indeed trapped within the toils of the ancient sceptical ‘Agrippan trilemma’ as resurrected by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi against Kant: thought either has to give reasons for reasons *ad infinitum*, which it cannot do, or else make an arbitrary assertion of foundations, or else again go round in perfect semantic circles.

This situation reveals a rather peculiar upshot. The consequence of abolishing the distinction between reason and fact is that a new and more abyssal gulf opens to view between ‘the space of reasons’ on the one hand, which is roughly coterminous with all of human culture, and ‘the space of causes’ on the other, which is roughly coterminous with all the natural world insofar as it is explored by human science. Though we seem safely sealed within a realm of pure hermeneutics, the trumping of this realm by a brutal naturalism always hovers over us. At the same time, the question of how our knowledge of causes exactly relates to the space of reasons seems unclear. This is the question of the philosophy of science, and accordingly we can see just why the philosophy of science is so pivotal for modern philosophy.

In the face of this upshot we can identify roughly three main responses within analytic philosophy. The first is the playing of the naturalist trump in the end, after a certain toying with the hermeneutic. In the first lecture, I already mentioned this in relation to Wilfred Sellars and indicated the irony that his insisting, after Frege, that a thought as conformed to the non-empirical logic of sense and reference is not reducible to sensation or emotion allows precisely the binary codification of thought and so finally its cyberneticisation and explanation in preconscious terms. In a somewhat similar fashion, Donald Davidson’s insistence that translatable equivalents

for all linguistic assertions can always be found, reduces all human meaning to a kind of common language of equivalents that can, again, readily be naturalised. With Davidson, as with Rorty, irony verges on paradox: our very entrapment within meaning is matched by the total meaninglessness of the realm of causes and in the end it is in terms of this realm that all is to be explained. Even if interpretation is permitted more vagaries of incommensurability, as earlier with Quine, these vagaries can be seen as mere wilful quirks with ultimately neurological instigations.

What one has here, therefore, is a snapshot of the gradual transit of which I spoke in the first lecture, from deconstructed epistemology to a naturalistic metaphysics, which seeks to develop an ontology from the deliverancies of science or mathematics themselves.

The second, at least semi-speculative option in the face of this deconstruction can be described as 'quasi-Hegelianism', and is exemplified by John McDowell. McDowell, like Blackburn, is properly uneasy about the idea that the myth of the given implies no 'giving' whatsoever, no pressure from outside upon our thoughts that would render them true or otherwise. And he notes the very point which I have just made, namely that rejection of the myth has enshrined a still more absolute dualism between a natural world supposedly without meaning and a realm of meaning that hovers seraphically about our heads.

In the face of this situation, like Blackburn, and in the long-term wake of Peter Strawson, McDowell considers whether we do not need a certain return to Kant. We have rightly rejected, he argues, the idea that given items of information from outside

us await categorisation by a fixed mental and logical repertoire. But in the case of Kant, schematisation involved a dynamic and spontaneous formation of sensory information by reason. Yet the problem here with McDowell's suggestions is that for Kant this dynamism is to do with a categorically-guided imposition of reason upon sense through the also *a priori* imaginings of space, time and transcendental objectivity. The divide between all that and discrete and contingent items of sensory information remains clear, precisely because, as Hamann pointed out against him, Kant had not yet taken the linguistic turn which shows that all of our categories are always already muddied by empirical and historical contingency. Indeed Davidson's final rejection of a dualism of scheme and content, within the framework of the analytic linguistic turn, puts the nail into the coffin of Kant, adding to the nails that Sellars and Quine had already put into the coffin of Locke. This is most apparent if Davidson's insight is detached from his theory of non-incommensurability, which arbitrarily reads the non-duality as favouring unity of content over relativity of scheme – whereas the point should be that just that issue now becomes undecidable. As Blackburn himself points out, Davidson's mistake was to suppose that the question of translation is primary for the question of understanding – whereas we can learn new self-standing discourses, as we learned our own language as infants, without any need for translatable equivalence.

But in effect, McDowell acknowledges this implication of Davidson's metacritique, because he seeks a far looser and more wide-ranging sense of mental spontaneity than Kant allowed. Furthermore, he wishes to escape from the shadow of phenomenalism in Kant, which has to do with Kant's disallowing that the meaningful categories of understanding can also be categories of being: thus all that arrives in our

minds from outside are random bits of information that yield up to us no depth beyond themselves. Therefore McDowell wishes to add to Kant an Aristotelian idea of 'second nature' which applies to the realm of human meaning and gives it a certain guarantee of ontological validity. Within this second nature, the meanings that we construct we also discover in a space of natural meaningfulness not confined to a merely human mental interiority. However, McDowell on his own confession is not really prepared to 're-enchant' the world, and still takes it that the meaningless world described by natural laws is the sole truth of underlying physical reality. He never resolves the resultant continuing dualism, but does say explicitly that, in order not to reduce the autonomy and spontaneity second of nature and yet not to obfuscate its breach with the senselessness of first nature, one must pass from Kant to Hegel and identify second nature with the unfolding of human history which exceeds any merely instrumental role of rational spontaneity in our understanding of the natural world. Here there can clearly be no duality of scheme and content and yet holism is no longer a trap because it constantly yields to the pressure of a true objective meaningfulness which is the gradual coming-to-light of human self-recognition in freedom. This appears to imply a full-scale historical teleology, yet whether it really does so and how, McDowell leaves uncertain.

The third option is that of Simon Blackburn himself. It consists in a Humean naturalisation of our thought, given a slight Kantian twist. To experience a certain natural check upon our reasonings, whether in the everyday or in the laboratory is simply how we are naturally constituted. At the same time, we do not need to choose between a Humean 'coping' and a more realist 'copying'. A certain realist commitment is simply built into the way we are, and is finally guaranteed by our

bodily insertion into the natural causal series. In this way Blackburn seeks to repair epistemology, and to resist the transit to metaphysical speculation, and yet he does so in terms that make natural science the norm and arbiter of truth in any strong sense.

The repair however, cannot hold, because Blackburn is never able to explain just how fluid holism is seriously breached. To say that a 'giving' but not 'givens' come from without still suggests that we do not receive this giving before we have assimilated it with all the specific inflexions of cognitive gratitude. Blackburn himself refuses, with good reasons in his own terms, any second-order or 'meta' accounts of truth in addition to the specific and various truth-claims made by particular sentences in certain pragmatic contexts, since such accounts would seem improperly to imply that we can check up on our own checking-processes from an unavailable standpoint that seeks to look behind what we can see, or to compare our seeing with what we see from an extra-human view from nowhere. But given such a refusal truth simply has a functionality with respect to how we happen to interrelate with the physical world and all we ever discover is the mutable variants of this relating and nothing about anything 'in itself' whatsoever. Without any stable essences and without any 'meta' account of how reasoning relates to the other-to-reason, there cannot be any 'truth' in any traditional sense, only an account of how things happen temporarily to be as they are for us within a wholly unstable universe. And though useful and indispensable, such modes of pseudo-truth are, in a final sense, trivial. They certainly cannot allow any platform for the inclusion also of moral or of aesthetic truths. So in essence Blackburn's position does not seriously differ from that of Davidson and Rorty, because he is reduced to acknowledging the sheer force of causation, outside any necessary processes comprehension, as the final redoubt of realism.



Yet a more plausible strategy here would be to question even the duality of reasons and causes: one can agree with Blackburn that we think as situated bodies affected by other things, but the mode of this affecting is highly various in tone, and only by artificial abstraction do we see this as primarily mechanical or efficient and then erect this mode into a supposed 'objectivity'. Inversely, therefore, it follows that we can only register causes within the space of reasons, and have no good philosophical warrant for supposing that reasons and meanings are alien to causes at all. Full-scale re-enchantment therefore remains on the cards, and it is arbitrary to claim that modern science, whose narrow criteria are those of prediction and control, can supply us even with an ontology of motion – a 'physics' in the ancient Aristotelian sense, because prediction and control are simply one restricted range of human meanings. If, all the same we allow, with Bergson and Whitehead, that human meanings should be taken naturalistically as transmutations of natural motions mediated by the body, then it becomes all the more plausible to wonder whether *other* human meanings, such as emotions, self-manifestation, aesthetic appreciation and aiming for a goal are altogether alien to the realm of natural motions.

Blackburn suggests, in a sortie against Derrida as well as Davidson, that 'as it bears down upon you, it is not possible to hold that the oncoming bus is a piece of text'. But of course it is possible, and one would only be disabused of this after the bus had knocked one out of the story. But then one would *not* know this, unless one was in heaven in which case one would not know it either, as the story would still be continuing.....I am reminded of a philosopher in the Cambridge Divinity Faculty who wished to defend to me a Lockean correspondence theory of truth, and

exclaimed in exasperation, 'but John! when I open the fridge, the butter is really there!' He clearly thought that if he looked a bit further he would find God mouldering away at the back of his refrigerator also.

The problem with Blackburn's rescue bid for epistemology is that no minimalism about truth can really support it, as he hopes. According to such minimalism, ever since Frege, 'it is true that it is raining' can be reduced to 'it is raining', without semantic loss. It is exegetically plausible to suppose that Frege saw a link between this view and his other views already mentioned in previous lectures: namely that there are only substances and no qualities, and that there is a distinction between sense and reference, even though they are never disjoined, because there cannot be, Frege claimed, against J.S. Mill, an empty, uncharacterisable proper name. Thus a sense 'of itself' normally points to a referent, just as it is 'redundant' to add 'it is true' to 'it is raining'. And the reference (here in *continuity* with Mill) is to a bare unqualified substance, with 'sense' denoting the diverse substantive attributes (naturally given or culturally ascribed) which happen to fall together in specific empirical instances.

Crucial to note here is the slight difference between the pre-Fregean contrast of the pair 'connotation and denotation' on the one hand, and the contrast of 'sense and reference' on the other. In the former case one can think of 'red' without a red item, but in the latter case, according to Frege, one is pointing out that a sufficiently named thing is always linked to a certain sense: as 'Mont Blanc' is a mountain and so forth, while inversely 'sense' always concerns some conjoined property of that to which one refers. Accordingly Gareth Evans and John McDowell have argued that, for Frege, sense is not, like connotation, primarily 'fictional' like 'red' which describes just as

well the colour of Red Riding Hood's cloak as it does the slavering tongue of the real wolf bearing down upon me in the remote mountain pass. Rather, fictional senses necessarily 'play along' or pretend to express propositions, just as we shall never be able to follow Red Riding Hood's story if we are not prepared to suspend disbelief and pay the price of vicarious terror.

But since 'sense' for Frege accordingly performs the real work of description – in contrast to Bertrand Russell's more trenchantly anti-Mill view that *reference itself* is only given through description – 'reference' here is reduced to a bare logical function that appears somewhat vulnerable. Kripke's view, reverting to J.S. Mill, that there can be purely empty names, or 'rigid designators' appearing (at least) to denote a vacuous and yet fixed ontological constancy (surely parallel to Paul Cohen's mathematical denial of the identity of indiscernibles?) puts into severe question both Frege and Russell's views, even if Kripke somewhat over-conflated the two.

In the wake of Kripke and of Michael Dummett's reflections on his work, one can conclude that all our more viable and content-filled references, ascribing (beyond rigid designation) characterisable identities in actual situations of concrete interconnectedness (as opposed to post-Kripkean fantasies of the transmigration without loss of empty identities to other possible worlds, as discussed in lecture 3) are saturated with sense without which they could not refer at all. Equally and inversely, there is no reason to suppose that these senses are not anchored aspectually in real things themselves, as *inherently* qualified substances, since we have no access to substance except through the perception of qualities (both essential and accidental or semi-accidental) – as was argued in the fifth lecture.

In this way the ‘intentionalist’ duality of sense and reference, arguably the very founding pillar of analytic philosophy, is itself overthrown, and therefore the disquotationalism of truth can no longer sustain a kind of minimal referential realism without any need for metaphysical foundation, or for *logos*, as Blackburn himself puts it. If it is always all-sufficient to say ‘it is raining’ in the face of rain, then we are philosophically confined to pragmatism, perspectivalism and a conventionalism that is at once and indistinguishably both naturalist and cultural. There is no ‘truth’ in sight here, either in terms of stability of identity, nor of continuity between reason and what is other-to-reason. (It should be said that minimalism, deflationism and disquotationalism are all slightly different theories of truth – but their family resemblance is strong enough for these differences not to be relevant to the current considerations)

I submit that it is because of these two realities, or the possibility of these two realities -- identity and continuity -- that we do indeed sometimes say, with seeming redundancy, that ‘it is true that it is raining’. Nietzsche and Sellars are more right than either Wittgenstein or Husserl here: there is no innocent, securely phenomenological life-world of pre-metaphysical language-games that is necessarily normative, even if it is initially unavoidable. Instead, our human languages themselves are collective conjectures or speculations and this is why they include debatable realities like natures, free-will purposes, ends, intentions, subjects, objects and values, bound up with inevitable anthropomorphism and equally unavoidable metaphorical concretisations of human performances. In this assumed context, to say merely ‘it is raining’ can mean that we are pretending, as in a drama, even if we must (after Evans

and McDowell) *really* pretend. And to say 'it is true that it is raining' might be more than a recursive meta-statement, because it removes the possible fictional brackets and says that this is not a stage-play since it really is, indeed raining. However, one could of course just say 'I'm not pretending' instead and thereby retain redundancy after all. So the frequent use of the word 'true', assuming reasonably that everyday grammar does not gratuitously and persistently expend itself in superfluity, suggests that indeed ordinary language inherits a metaphysical commitment to the notion that the rain is real beyond its merely real appearing to us or its reduction to more fundamental physical processes.

We are saying that *something out there has the form of rain*, which I can affirm because this form communicates itself to me and allows me to shape it in mental idiom for myself. What is more, we should not exclude from consideration the semantic slide from true as meaning 'is there' to true as meaning 'proper exemplification of a quality': as in 'that's true rain' which is otherwise expressed as 'it's really raining'. This makes sense because the existential affirmation of rain cannot be detached from the *discrimination* of rain from mere drizzle or something more like sleet. 'Rain' is referential only because it is also an isolation of sense in the strong sense of locating the sense 'out there' as a meaning-component of a really existing thing. Therefore realism can only be sustained if there is indeed an objective *eidos* of rain, which realises the form of raininess in various degrees and if there is a continuity between the meaning of this *eidos* out there in the world and my being caused to comprehend this *eidos*.

So Blackburn is right to see that there can only be *real logos* and not sham *logos*, of the kind desired by correspondence theorists, including theological ones who hope forlornly to creep from the butter to God. But he will not quite admit, with sceptics like Rorty, that only the former, the real *logos*, can be identified with any sort of realist philosophy.

But in further considering the relation of reason to the other-to-reason, we find that recent continental philosophy offers us more robust options.

It does so because it much less evasively poses the basic question of whether the relationship of reason to the other-to-reason is itself rational or extra-rational. We can link this alternative once more to that between a finitist epistemology and an infinitist ontology of an immanent totality. Once again: Kant or Spinoza, if we allow with Jacobi that the latter's 'pantheism' deconstructs into an arational nihilism.

However, again in the wake of the great and crucial Jacobi, one can show that these two opposites are secretly identical, in a way that parallels McDowell's inevitable slide from Kant to Hegel. Fichte, Schelling and Hegel (and even the final Kant himself of the *Opus Postumum*) sought to combine Kant with Spinoza by showing that the dynamic and historical unfolding of thought immanent to the subject, in continuity with the 'purposiveness without purpose' of the organic entity -- that after all, beyond the perspectives of Kant's first *Critique*, *ontologically* integrates shaping structure with material content -- fully discloses the infinite-finite reality of nature herself. Quentin Meillassoux rightly argues that only this hybridisation and not pure critical-epistemological Kantianism makes sense, because this merely

transcendental idealism is forced to assume that there are finite limits to the exercise of immanent reason. If these limits genuinely pertain to reality, then such transcendentalism can only know if its own limited performance of reason coincides with a reality that includes such limits in a speculative manner that would render transcendentalism's own agnostic foreswearing of speculation incoherent.

It follows that the more subjective, gnoseological understanding of immanence is legitimate only if it coincides by a new route with the more objective, ontological understanding of immanence, through force of speculation, claimed intuition or faith.

But even if reason can reach to the infinite, we can still ask, is reason part of an extra-rational infinite substance, or is this totality itself rational? In terms of a secular philosophy of radical immanence, this problematic turns out to issue in three more specific dilemmas.

The second dilemma runs: if an immanent non-reasoning reality is ultimate, then it must be auto-generating; but how arises the power of auto-generation? As we asked in the second and third lectures, does it lie within an insistent potency that is often termed 'virtuality'? Or does it rather lie somehow in the self-sustaining capacity of the actual as it occurs and arises?

This leads to the third and closely related dilemma. If one favours act over virtuality, according to the second fork of the second dilemma, then does not this render the individual primary in its non-relational givenness? But if the individual as uncaused is all that we can ultimately know, according to an extreme sceptical

nominalism, then are we not back with a Kantian transcendental confinement that remains open to a Scotist fideistic invocation of God as the wilful source of individuation as *haecceitas*, whose genesis finite reason cannot penetrate? But if, alternatively, one favours virtuality over act, then must not individuation be ascribed to a prior and impersonal *force* of individuation, whose ontological or henological priority will tend to swallow up the irreducible reality of the merely individual, ontic thing as merely a more-or-less illusory moment of a more fundamental and fated process?

The fourth dilemma relates strongly to the previous three. It is that of monism versus dualism. If there is but one, immanent world, then surely unity should have the last word? But in that case, materialist monism can seem all too mystical. And how, exactly, is this unity known to exist? The immanent One is *superior* to individuating perspectives which are relatively limited or even outright delusory. Yet the One only *is* as the all of everything. As itself, as Jacobi first pointed out, it is nothing, and even those individual modes with which the one substance is identical are themselves evacuated by virtue of their subordination to the empty whole. (This is once more the problematic of the two nothings, as discussed in the earlier lectures.) At this point rational materialism has morphed into mystical nihilism. This may be perfectly rational, yet it ensures the abolition of the ultimate reality of reason.

This could only perhaps be avoided if materialism could come up with some sort of account of the mediation between the One and the Many. Likewise if it could find a middle ground between reason and reality, virtuality and actuality and individuation and individuals.



We can now say that this issue of mediation which I initially invoked constitutes a *fifth* dilemma that diagonally crosses the other four.

Why should all these accounts of immanent mediation together constitute a fifth dilemma? They do so because, once one has denied or bracketed a transcendent God, mediation -- the operation of the Platonic *metaxu* -- cannot really be seen as ultimate. For in this perspective the ultimate immanent reality is either the whole world or else the interiority of the experiencing subject or else again, both at once. Therefore, any third between these two *has* to be a 'vanishing mediator' in Slavoj Žižek's phrase, as it was indeed for speculative idealism, whose 'mediation' proves therefore to be, in William Desmond's term, somewhat 'counterfeit'. The 'middle' ultimately effaces itself in favour of either the totality on the one hand or the knowing subject on the other. Or both at the same time, as with Hegel's ultimate 'diremption' of absolute knowledge.

It follows that, in order to remain and not vanish, and thereby resolve the *aporias* of immanence, mediation must *diagonalise out* of immanence and itself be taken as the ultimate but now transcendent reality. It must be regarded as an infinitely sustained and yet paradoxically infinitely realised 'between', in which finite processes of mediation merely participate. Yet through this mere participation, their mediating character is preserved and not abolished, whereas in the case of an immanent process of mediation taken to be absolute, this mediating character must logically and instantly disappear.

Let us try to analyse the import of the five dilemmas of speculative materialism in the face of the phenomenon of reason. First of all, the primacy of reason as against the primacy of the other-to-reason.

Alain Badiou, as we saw in lecture three, leans to the first side of this first dilemma by identifying the real with the rational by virtue of a strange mode of idealist materialism. Because for him all of being is composed of rationally identifiable mathematical ‘items’, material appearances do not of themselves disclose being, nor participate in being, but rather tend to obfuscate it. It is instead reason which consciously discloses the infinite *repertoire* of the absolutely random. Here an empty subjectivity manifests and even eventuates the emptiness of the final ontological ground. The normal reality of the other-to-reason is lost, and reason is forced to stand on the impossible grounds of its own origins, which is merely to elect the middle option of the Agrippan trilemma. (It is how possible to read Badiou against himself, or in terms of the priority of the mathematical ontology, but in terms of the priority of the event, as we saw in lecture three.)

The alternative option for the priority of the other-to-reason is taken by François Laruelle, the wildest of all the *soixante-huitardes*, who makes Jacques Derrida look like an unlikely cross between A.J. Ayer and your most tight-lipped maiden aunt.

Much more emphatically than other materialists, Laruelle insists upon the secondariness of thought. The real is one: beyond existence, beyond reason, beyond even matter as we know it. This One is therefore like the neoplatonic One – except

that it encompasses equally all of finitude and gives rise to no emanative processions in the Plotinian sense.

The discourse about this materialist One, according to Laruelle, is a ‘non-philosophy’ by analogy with non-Euclidean geometries. In terms of this analogy every philosophy can be seen to have erected a conventional system that circulates between arbitrarily privileged elements that ‘condition’ and subordinate elements that are ‘conditioned’. Each philosophy is a pure artistic decision made by thought, but more deeply, in ontological terms, it is an event of mental practice that coincides with, rather than is determined by, the One itself, which is alone absolute. Indeed human beings cannot help living inside such arbitrary philosophies, just as Wilfred Sellars thought that all language projects a metaphysics.

It follows that, beneath the apparently final reciprocity of the conditioning-conditioned circle lies a ‘unilateral duality’, or a paradoxical ‘unilateral exchange’ between the One itself and the sphere of apparently final reciprocity. This sphere belongs entirely to the One, and is, from its own point of view, ‘given’ by it. On the other hand it ‘returns’ entirely to the One while adding absolutely nothing to the One. This is because, from the perspective of the One, there is no duality at all, even of a unilateral kind. There is only the One, and yet the One exists for us as giving rise to its own apparent foreclosure in the reciprocal circle of conditioning and conditioned. Hence apparent causes within this world, including the causality exercised by reason, are only ‘occasions’ for the ‘determination in the last instance’ (for this is an explicitly *Marxist* ontology) by the One. But the One does not condition our reality – it simply and immediately *is* this reality: all the particular conditioned things as much

as the general conditions, which are both thereby cancelled. Hence for Laruelle the actual needs no virtual process and individuals no dynamic of individuation, because there is nothing metaphysically 'prior', like Deleuze's virtuality. But, in consequence, the Many as underived, including the processes of human reason are also *effaced*. Effaced by the One.

But how is it possible for Laruelle to deny that the so-called 'determination in the last instance' is a kind of meta-conditioning, locked in a complicit circle with the conditioned reality of the sphere of conditioning-conditioned itself? This would render his non-philosophy indeed just one more arbitrary example of the usual philosophical game, rather than being a kind of supervenient hyperphilosophy. The alternative would require Laruelle to insist upon the true reality of the One alone if he is to deny that it is involved in any meta-conditioning. and embrace a kind of acosmic Gnosticism.

And that, in a Christian variant (which somewhat baffles his would-be cool British fans in New Universities) is precisely what Laruelle in his more recent writings explicitly embraces.

So can we see neoplatonism and neoplatonisms reworked by monotheism as an alternative Laruelle's non-philosophy, just as it was anciently an alternative to such gnosticism? Indeed we can. For in the case of neoplatonism the One emanates and *becomes* particulars; it fully *gives* and does not merely condition. As Laruelle's non-philosophy envisage it, conditioning involves an epistemological or phenomenological donation, but not ontological donation. But such a mode of

conditioning without ontological donation is specifically modern: post-Scotist and then post-Kantian, since it is dependent upon the univocalisation and then the epistemologisation of the notion of the 'transcendental' as the conditioning field (as we saw in the first lecture). Laruelle's conditioning/conditioned paradigm therefore only properly characterises *modern* philosophy, and in his terms the perennial philosophy deserves the status of a non-philosophy. Moreover as such it escapes the aporetic problems of his own, gnostic variant through the paradoxical logic of participation, whereby that which is distinguished is only distinguished through derivation.

Participatory emanation therefore most of all exemplifies Laruelle's paradoxical 'unilateral exchange'. All of reality is sheerly given, such that even the return it makes to the ultimate source is also given. This *schema* of emanation is fully consummated as the logic of creation *ex nihilo* for which all finite being without exception must be entirely *from God*.

What are the implications of these considerations for the relationship between reason and the other-to-reason?

For the most radical philosophical version of immanence -- that of Laruelle -- reason is an illusory perspective which finds no refuge in reality, and, just as Kant and Hegel reduce to a nihilistic Spinozism according to Jacobi, so we have seen that Badiou tends to reduce to Laruelle, because for him vacuity gives rise to thought and therefore what is thought, must be, ontologically-speaking vacuous, as in the dramas of Samuel Beckett. But for the theology of creation finite reason is a derived gift

whose reality is saved and elevated by a transcendent unity or *esse* which is also, as the adequate causal ground of everything, an infinite reason and an infinite will. An ultimate 'reason' for things need not indeed be demanded by a fully consistent materialism, because such a notion suggests most obviously an original infinity of reason itself, which is a clearly spiritualising gesture. (Although one should add here that in Laruelle's case a 'matter without reason' is scarcely matter at all, but is rather the airiest of absolute unities.) But an infinity of reason is an unknown reason – a *mystery* of reason which we must nonetheless acknowledge if we are not to deny the ultimate grounding in reality of our own reasoning power.

These appear to be fairly straightforward conclusions of a metaphysical theology. But within them lurks the not sufficiently recognised point that the idea of transcendence allows one uniquely to think this category of *unknown reason*.

It is precisely this category of unknown reason which permits one to resolve the *aporia* of unknown being versus known reason which must haunt and torture any immanent materialism. Given transcendence, one does not have to choose between an idealist priority of reason on the one hand, which threatens to reduce all matter to the unfolding of an immanent and probably fated mental process, and the priority of being on the other, which threatens to negate the reality of reason in favour of an entirely arational mysticism. The choice arises because, within immanence, being must be allied with the unknown and reason – as seems obvious – with the known. But the thought of transcendence is also the crucial but seemingly quite bizarre idea of a 'hidden thought', a 'secret thought'. To say that 'there is infinite reason' is to say 'I am thinking that there is a thought which I cannot think but which I nonetheless think

exists'. And one could add, 'gives me to think, by virtue of which alone I am able to think'. In this light reason assumes not just the other-to-reason but 'another reason', an infinite reason.

And just this idea means that reason no longer has to choose between the priority of unknown being and known reason. Instead it can think unknown being as *also* unknown reason which saves the final reality of both, besides the irreducibility of the phenomenal interplay of reason and being within finite reality.

So we have now resolved, through adverting to transcendence, the first dilemma concerning reason and the other-to-reason. And this first dilemma is the crucial one: seeing our way through this allows us to see our way through all the others.

The second dilemma concerned act and virtuality. If virtuality is prior to act, then one risks idealism or acosmism, as we have seen in the case of Deleuze. But if actuality is prior, as with Badiou, then, as he says, the self-sustaining of the event would appear to be like the event of grace. If the truth of the event, or of the 'truth process' is to be more than human subjective projection, then surely it must indeed be the advent of the grace of God? The irony here is that to speak of the priority of act rather than possibility is the more radically materialist option – it gets rid of the shadow of an initiating God in the shape of the virtual. Yet for materialist immanence to hold, the future cannot really have priority, as the invocation of grace would imply. For this priority of the future would necessarily denote arrival from an *eschatological* future, an ontology governed by apocalyptic. Thus in the case of Laruelle, more consistently, the self-grounding of act without any virtuality is still more extreme, and

involves a pure presentism, a little reminiscent of the one entertained by Borges. Yet the price of this presentism, as we have seen, is the total identification of the act with a single monistic reality which removes it any of its apparently specific truth and identity.

Similar considerations apply to the third dilemma concerning individuation and individuality. Confident materialism must subordinate the latter to the former, thereby again sacrificing the particular instance to prior process.

By comparison, a participatory theological perspective allows one to render individuals ultimate and yet (unlike Scotus, who resorted to divine will as *deus ex machina* at this point) to think also their individuating generation – both historically and metaphysically. Generation can be regarded here as a relatively constant *habitus*, which constitutively relates one thing to another, but not as something rooted in any prior virtuality. Such rooting is redundant, because the *habitus* is lured forward by the transcendent God who alone bestows existence always as particular being and so as relatively self-standing. Within such a metaphysics, as articulated by Aquinas, it is seen that a mysterious matter limits universal form, but it is the actuality of the form/matter composite itself, as participatively related to God which really individuates. (Hence God's special intervention as individuating agent, apart from his general overriding and all-determining causality becomes unnecessary.) Materialism, by contrast, regards a positive matter as the sole individuating factor. But this is to swallow up individuals themselves within the prior reality of an individuating force, as it is also to denature matter by regarding it (in the long-term wake of Scotus's idea of matter as 'quasi-form') as itself possessed of a formative power or virtual ideality.



The irony is that materialism always loses the reality of matter itself, which can only remain matter in benign tensional contrast to the spirituality of form. Hence the only real materialism (contra Gilbert Simondon) is the semi-materialism that is hylomorphism, even though this concedes the ‘other’ reality of form. For only as other to form, and therefore as being in itself non-characterisable, does matter remain an unfathomable negative mystery with its own integral part to play, even though this is a ‘non-part’.

As to the fourth dilemma of monism and dualism, we have already seen how Creation by a transcendent God, which is the perfecting of the emanation-model, sustains the only genuine monism. Just as the semi-materialism of hylomorphism turns out to be the most possibly materialist philosophy (without losing matter altogether), so also the semi-monism of the emanation model turns out to be the most possibly monistic philosophy (without losing the One to an original duality after all). The only truly ‘one’ reality is a shared reality – the giving of a gift by a giver.

Finally, we come to the overriding fifth dilemma of mediation. I have already argued that the unique mark of a philosophy of transcendence is to leave mediation as ultimate: within the creation; between creation and creator as participatory relation; within God as substantive relation which is infinitised participation.

But now we can give another name to mediation, to match its objective name of beauty. This more subjective name is habit.

Behind so much of modern French thought lies Bergson, but behind Bergson lies the figure of his teacher Félix Ravaisson (1815-1900), philosopher, archaeologist and sometime curator of the statuary of the Louvre, whose thought was mostly compatible with orthodox Catholicism, even though, like Péguy or Weil later, his Republican principles no doubt kept him mostly away from church. Ravaisson committed little to print, but had an astonishing gift for combining brevity, clarity, elegance and density. Directly or indirectly (it is not easy to say which) he clearly influenced also Maurice Blondel and through Blondel Henri de Lubac's attempts to integrate grace into philosophy.

Ravaisson's key contribution was to develop Maine de Biran's novel reflections upon the fundamental importance of habit. Like Meillassoux today, Ravaisson already in 1836, in his short but most crucial work *De L'Habitude*, saw the laws of the universe as but the condensations of habit-formed processes. He boldly raised the theoretical and natural importance of Aristotelian *hexis* to an equality with its practical and ethical importance for the Stagirite. In this way natural evolution became thinkable in basically Aristotelian terms, because it is now allowed that a sufficient change in the quality of accidents can alter the constitution of species.

More crucially, for my current reflections, Ravaisson claimed that habit was the link between movement and thinking, existence and mind.

A habit, according to Ravaisson, blends reception and reaction – it coagulates effort. The more reaction prevails, the more one has autonomous sentience and finally reflexive thought. But just as pure reception would make no effort and compose no

consistent process of repetition (or 'habit'), so also pure unrestricted action, without the need to make any effort in the face of resistance, would fail to make such a composition. Therefore thinking spirit must remain poised between unconscious receptive sensation and more active perception that finally turns into the power of judgement. Mind as active patterning requires the passivity of sensing and feeling.

In this way all habits are born of a reactive effort and remain suspended in an ontological 'middle'. All the same, relatively passive habits tend to degenerate and to disappear beneath the mental horizon. The sun which I see everyday I stop consciously and actively seeing at all. Yet the *very same* increase in habituation (as David Hume and Maine de Biran had already pointed out) strengthens specifically mental habits – the more I speak Italian, the more I can speak Italian. Moreover, just like relatively passive habits, relatively active habits become increasingly *automatic* the more that they are strengthened. I stop thinking the sun which I continuously see. But similarly, if I get really good at Italian I no longer even will to speak it, even though I am all the more genuinely thinking it as I acquire the ability to think 'in it'.

However, this is not really a contrast between the bodily and the mental. A weak, passive habit tends to be a bad, lazy habit at the corporeal level also. The more that we fail to think about what we are seeing or about how we are moving, the more we stumble through life in an ungainly fashion with a numbed, dazed expression upon our faces. We become increasingly characterless *automata*. Yet inversely, the more we consciously discipline our bodies, the more our mental patterns become incarnated. We eventually drive our cars without thinking, even in a state of semi-stupor, and the best pianist is the one whose hands do all the thinking. Ravaisson cites

Berkeley in *Siris* as saying that such movements no longer proceed from the musician, but from ‘some other active intelligence’ (clearly echoing Cudworth) – perhaps the same intelligence which governs the creative action of bees and spiders, the movements of somnambulists and – according to Herder – the auto-construction of crystals. Therefore automatism is ambiguous: it is both degeneration and elevation.

On the elevated side, for Ravaisson, a really strong intellectual habit spirals kenotically back down into nature, like the musical intelligence that resides in human hands. In this respect we can see a difference in his thinking from that of both Bergson and Deleuze. Mental intuition does not tend to free itself from spatialising repetition through immersion in the ontological primacy of ecstatically temporal duration. Rather, the more habit grows active and intellectual, the more it becomes second nature, the more it acquires continuity and consistency within time as a process of non-identical repetition which combines both the ecstatic fusion of past, present and future and the sequential unfolding of ordinary clock-time. The paradigm for this combination is, of course, as Augustine already saw, the flow of music. But such an active habit also colonises and more deeply occupies space. The pianist is remarkably in charge of spatial co-ordinations, while the flowing lines of the painter’s brush or the sequence of cinematic frames are in effect the music of images.

Yet it might seem, in terms of our first dilemma, concerning the relation of reason to the other-to-reason, that Ravaisson returns fully-realised reason to the level of the automatically sub-rational. But he does not do so. For if, he argues, habit were really only material and mechanical, there would be no explanation for why an active habit strengthens and elevates rather than weakens and degenerates. But inversely, if habit

were only voluntary, there would be no reason why an interrupted habit – for example a child consistently failing to do its piano practice – would be so disastrous for the attainment of consistency, never mind a fluid consistency. So no, if habit is capable of elevation it must constitute a genuine *metaxu*, a genuine middle between matter and spirit. If habit is not finally an affair of the will, then it certainly remains an affair of the intelligence.

However, this problematic does not apply only to the level of human understanding. It is also, for Ravaisson, an ontological problematic. As we have already seen, he refused any idealist or transcendentalist notion that the ‘laws of nature’ are prior to the material processes of nature itself. One could read this thesis in either a materialist fashion (like Meillassoux) or in an Aristotelian/Thomistic fashion. What Ravaisson himself offered was a kind of anarchised Aristotelianism. He dynamised hylomorphism by proposing that all consistent processes in nature are the deposits of *hexis*. Our most immediate access to the nature of habit lies in our own experience, and this must be our guide to reading the whole operation of habit within nature. However, such a method is not idealism, because, as we have seen, reflection on our own experience itself undoes any priority for the subject and roots thinking back in pre-mental processes which we can but imperfectly command. On the one hand then, the primacy of habit grounds the human spirit in a prior material reality; on the other hand the workings of habit are most clearly disclosed in human experience. The highest is in continuity with the lowest, but one should read the lowest teleologically in terms of the highest, not the highest sceptically in terms of the lowest.

If, however, shaping habit has now assumed a certain immanent primacy over established form, and we know from our own experience that habit is both proto-mental and hyper-mental, then Ravaisson was bound to imply a certain panpsychism within nature. Every material reality is a kind of proto-reflection, with the exception of pure extension that is itself but the basest deposit of habitual processes. The problematic of spirit as habit is therefore also the problematic of nature *tout court*.

What, precisely, is this problematic? It is the question that follows from the (thoroughly Thomistic!) priority of intellect over will which the primacy of habit discloses. If habits are not merely willed and are more than a matter of the physically aleatory, then how are they ever established in the first place? To say that habit is fundamental is to say that something that by definition must be first established, must be *formed* – spiritually as well as materially -- is fundamental. If habit is prior to form, then, it would seem, nothing is left to form habits. There can be no habit-forming; but in that case how can there be habits? ‘An original habit’ is aporetic. This is precisely the paradox of habit which was already articulated by David Hume and Maine de Biran.

In response to this paradox, Ravaisson indeed posited a seemingly impossible arch-habit, an ungrounded spontaneity of non-identical repetition which constitutes the regime of self-forming habit as such. But if habits are rooted in spontaneity and are also intellectual or proto-intellectual, then, invoking with Ravaisson himself the *Meno* problematic, how does spontaneity ever first arise? How does it know to seek to know what it does not as yet know? Ravaisson’s answer is that the nature of this spontaneity is also revealed by its presence within us in its highest form which is that of *desire*.

It follows that if the arch-habit is more a proto-understanding than it is a proto-will as power of pure self-grounded choice, that it is nonetheless more fundamentally, as it is experienced within the finite world, desire than it is understanding. If mediation is habit, then mediating habit is always *eros*.

Unlike Bergson and Deleuze, Ravaisson remains with the paradoxical ultimacy of the middle. Arch-habit as *eros* is not the mere expression of material force, but neither is it a striving towards fully-conscious intuitive reason which would cancel the spatialising perspectives of fixed habituation. Rather, it is more basic than either. But how can this be the case? Habit, by definition is constituted, so cannot be finally self-constituted. Either, it would seem, it must be commanded by inscrutable physical processes that may be fundamentally aleatory and but accidentally regular, or it must be commanded by a conscious shaping will. The primacy of habit sustains a ‘common-sense’ balance between spirit and matter only at the apparent price of rendering this balance inexplicable.

At this point Ravaisson realises that the only way out has to be theological. Not just our mental experience of habit is ontologically exemplary; also our personal experience of divine grace which Aquinas considered to be a supernaturally infused habit. An ultimate immanent middle, or a ‘self-forming arch-habit’ can only sustain this immanent ultimacy if it is itself lured forward by desire from an absolute ‘elsewhere’. Its primacy here below must be incited by a transcendent God above. It follows that for Ravaisson *all* natural habit is an approximation to supernaturally infused habit. For it is the theology of grace that most of all advertises and remains

with the paradox of habit: a habit should be developed in order to become a habit, but here a habit is itself infused, bizarrely and impossibly *given* to us.

Ravaisson himself cited not Aquinas but Fénelon: 'nature is prevenient grace'. In other words, nature as fundamentally habitual must be seen as like our human receptivity to grace which is *also* grace-given, in default of any Pelagianism. This therefore means that the transition from nature to grace is entirely a matter of grace and that nature is in some sense already grace, only there at all as a preparation for spiritual elevation.

But he only makes this affirmation because of his panpsychism. Given that, as we have just seen, for the Augustinian tradition in which Fénelon still stood, spirit as such is the advance reception of grace, then the 'spiritualisation of nature' which follows from the thesis about the primacy of habit requires one to extend the natural desire for the supernatural and even the beginning of prevenient grace from angels and humans to the entire cosmos. Here Ravaisson sees the grace of aesthetic beauty as revealing the link between the grace of natural formation and the grace of ethical motion: the flowing line of Renaissance painting corresponds in its 'relaxations' and 'pauses', which never interrupt its continuity, to the moral movement of self-abandonment which alone sustains the true self. And between human plastic art and the (moral) 'art of life' as such, the 'orchestrating' art of dance forms a further mediation. In this way Ravaisson identified habit as the subjective aspect of mediation with the beautiful as its objective aspect.



But this is not the only theological aspect to his philosophy. In the *Testament Philosophique* he implies that the ontology of grace is also a Trinitarian ontology. One can extend his hint by saying that it is the ontological figure of the Trinity that allows that even God *within himself* remains infinitely the mediation of habit. God the Father is exhaustively constituted as the manifestation of the habit of reason in the Son which is itself generated only through the lure of infinite desire which is the Holy Spirit. Ravaisson indeed reminds us that the classical name of the Spirit is 'gift'. Hence one can conclude that infinite reason remains a mediation because it is both the manifestation of an origin and the continued proffering beyond itself of a gift which is the gift both of the origin and the manifestation. This mediation cannot be cancelled because the origin *is*, by substantive relation, the manifestation, and the gift *is*, by substantive relation, the gift of reason, even though it is the surplus bearer of reason through desire. It is as if, even in God, the *Meno* problematic is not so much solved through dissolution as through infinitisation as *perichoresis*.

It is therefore clear that Ravaisson's solution of the *aporia* of habit requires the terms of a hybrid philosophical-theological discourse.

Yet it is only this solution that fully secures the ultimate reality of reason. For reason to be finally real, one must assume that we participate in an infinite *unknown* reason which is mediated to us by grace as supernatural infused habit, and fully restored to our bad passive habits of lazy unreasoning through the Incarnation of the *Logos* itself, who was both divinely habituating and humanly habituated. Similarly, we can only overcome the duality of meaningless nature versus meaningful culture,

which finally undoes all meaning and all reason, if we allow that reality is truly creation, the divine culture which is the only natural reality.

However, this saving of reason involves inseparably the saving also of the other-to-reason, including the reality of matter. For if reason can only be saved when we see that it is the consummation of habit, then the corporeal ground of habit must also be retained. By giving primacy to mediation, both reason and the other-to-reason are respected, but this must mean granting an even more primary respect to *the hierarchical scale of being* which alone unites them through degrees of habituation.

Nevertheless, the primacy of mediating habit also disturbs this hierarchy, as we have already seen. A crucial novelty of Ravaisson's analysis is that active habit, as poised between receptivity and initiative, does not become more secure and self-sustaining by gradually reducing the receptive aspect. On the contrary, it can only become more securely *habit* as opposed to the indeterminate power-to-choose by increasing its own adaptive power in the face of newly received sensations. A secure habit must be able to integrate novel occurrences within the pattern of its own *oikeosis*, which means that it must increase its receptive capacity just to the extent that it will not be overwhelmed in its singularity by what it receives from without – whereas a weak habit is at the mercy of the most banally continuous external stimulations. Yet this retaining of one's own character in the face of outside influence does not at all betoken a kind of stubbornness – on the contrary, it requires a flexibility, else in the end one will not be able to adapt in order to survive. Thus to speak of a strong habit is to speak of a consistency of style which is paradoxically unpredictable.

And since all being is constitutively relational, one can only sustain self-consistency through an ability continuously and flexibly to influence one's surroundings. This means that habit, including above all a reasoning habit (which has the most flexible and yet consistent style), is the most active when it is also the most incarnated and becomes the most 'automatic'.

The entire defence of the ultimacy of reason therefore turns out to require a certain benign mortification of reason. Reason is after all most of all reason when it is feeling, when it is touch, when it is speculative *eros*. Rationalism tries to reduce all emotion and all reality to reason or else to render a cold, emotionless reason totally obeisant to reality. In either direction, as we have seen, reason is lost. But when we think through the metaphysical conditions under which the reality of reason can be secured, then it turns out that we have to defend reason's mediating link to the other-to-reason in terms of the receptive and exploring emotions – of passionate sensation and shaping desire.